

**THE BEAUTY OF POST-APOCALYPTIC WILDERNESS IN GEORGE R.
STEWART'S *EARTH ABIDES* (1949)**

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Abstract

*Post-apocalyptic fiction is known for the gloomy future of the earth after it is targeted by a devastating apocalypse such as a nuclear explosion, pandemic, or any several others. In this regard, the future of the world, in light of the apocalypse, is mysterious owing to the horrific state of human annihilation. However, the post-apocalypse genre, in the case of Stewart's *Earth Abides*, demonstrates the glamour of nature in the absence of technology. This paper mainly demonstrates the beauty of the wilderness in *Earth Abides*, despite the collapse of civilization. Furthermore, the study indicates the tranquility and peace of nature in the American pastoral after the pandemic hit the United States on a large scale.*

Key Words: wilderness, nature, beauty, pastoral, urbanization, wasteland, pandemic, post-apocalyptic world, animals, emptiness.

Wilderness Expansion

Wilderness is the main theme in *Earth Abides* by George R. Stewart (1895-1980), and has different aspects of post-apocalyptic fiction. The novel shows a great change in the world after the apocalyptic plague annihilated the United States on a large scale. In the novel, the world witnesses a horrific change in terms of how the urban life, with all its huge buildings: libraries, schools, colleges, and factories, has perished by the effect of earth expanse. Additionally, the civilization of the human vanished while wilderness was getting expanded all over the earth even in places where the human has established his civilization on earth. The world witnessed the dominance of technology over the wilderness that resulted in the demolition of nature before the advancement of human civilization. However, the scenario in *Earth Abides* is indeed

different in the sense that wilderness expands in the urbanization where giant governments established huge infrastructure upon a time. For his part, Stewart reveals the fragility of the civilizations with time. The novel details the story of a plague that harvests the population of the United States, and the remaining ones are not sufficient in number to rebuild their new society amidst the ruins. Realistically speaking, it took time for the civilizations to be established and reach the peak of development and urbanization. Nevertheless, in the peak of the glory, all achievements of the human over time can fade away in the breakout of any pandemic. The earth, depopulated of its inhabitants, is left to its nature to grow in the absence of the humankind. Who is going to stop the expansion of primitive life in the post-human age? In this state, the wilderness is an inviting place for animals to colonize the place. In an aesthetic image of the wilderness expansion, Stewart displays the absurd existence of the remaining technology of the previous civilization:

Still he looked for the small things that showed how the wilderness was moving in to take charge—the tiny sprout of a poplar tree standing up in the shaggy grass of a lawn, a telephone wire dangling on the road, the tracks of dried mud where a coon had paused to dip its food in the water of the fountain beneath the statue of the Civil War soldier in front of the court-house. (Stewart, p. 69)

The place is one of the most important aspects in *Earth Abides*. In this regard, Stewart spreads the wilderness and emphasizes the library as the aesthetic image in which the previous civilization turns to nothing. The courtyard of the library became a place for the wilderness to expand. The library is rich in books which are the only remaining knowledge of the previous civilization. After the apocalypse, the library appeared of no use, even the bushes have circled it and bird droppings were found on the books: “Thus, in *Earth Abides*, a university library, not a factory or a supermarket, is considered as the most sacred place that can save the traces of human knowledge” (Moon, 2014, p. 116).

Beauty in the Emptiness and Pastoral Life:

Post-apocalyptic fiction is a genre that has different images of the landscape in the pastoral life. It has a future vision of life after a global catastrophe takes place. Out of passion and curiosity, post-apocalyptic authors release their imagination in the future and depict the events in the absence of human civilization. In this regard, post-apocalyptic fiction is not meant

to give a negative image of the ruined earth. Further, the genre was not created to show the devastation only after the apocalypse. It also shows the survivors' efforts to rebuild a new society. Therefore, the post-apocalyptic novels have a horizontal perspective of the futuristic life after the annihilation of mankind: Hageman states:

When approaching the stark landscapes of modern novels one of the important central themes of early post-apocalyptic texts is the ultimate recovery of the land. As Stewart famously ends his novel “‘they will commit me to the earth,’ he thought. ‘Yet I also commit them to the earth. (Hageman (2015, p. 8)

Post-apocalyptic emerged at the beginning of the second half of the 20th century. Hence, all aspects of nature were adopted in the genre to show sublime speculations in terms of the potential future of the earth. In this context, the landscapes of nature have appeared in literature in the eighteenth century to depict the beauty of nature and life. The depiction of the landscape is an indication of the diversity in cultures through history. Therefore, the employment of nature in literature has taken an important place over history. In this aspect, the age of William Wordsworth shows the flow of emotions as well as the deep nostalgia to the pastoral life. It is also noteworthy that the Italian classical painters referred in their works to the past and nostalgia of pastoral Italy to show their fluidity of emotions and feelings for the past of rustic life. “This so-called Italianate impulse was a nostalgic longing for a more rustic, Roman way of life” (Melbey, 2010, p. 25). Thus, this part of the literature gave the Roman painters plenty of space to release their emotions towards the rustic life which was sort of relief after they longed for their lands.

As far as nature is concerned, there are some who may argue on the presence of beauty in the post-apocalyptic world where devastation and ruins are all that remains. In my part, beauty is not only in the utopian side of the novel rather it is in the peace and tranquility of nature after a lot of hustle and bustle of the city life. Moreover, post-apocalyptic life is a return to the simple primitive life where the human and nature are close to each other despite the harsh living and quest for food. This kind of literature does not predict any utopian society after the apocalypse, at least in a direct way. The dystopian and post-apocalyptic genres are part of the science fiction that shows the state of unrest and chaos. Meanwhile, post-apocalyptic fiction has some indications of a different futuristic life. However, it is not certain whether that life is going to be

good or bad. On the other hand, the dystopian fiction may not show any promising future whereas, post-apocalyptic fiction, though dim and gloomy, offers a new beginning of life after the apocalypse. Therefore, there is a sort of attraction in post-apocalyptic fiction which is meant with the journey of existence in the wasteland and wilderness. In this regard, Stewart offers the characters in the post-apocalyptic world where they are face to face with nature. This confrontation between humans and nature has a lot of beauty that is only seen through the strife and struggle of the human in a world of nothingness. Besides, after the collapse of the civilizations, the world appears in a state of devastation, and only pastoral life is left for the survivors to roam about. Thus, living through the existence of the rustic nature reveals the attraction and sublime of the aesthetic side of the post-apocalypse genre. Dunlap writes:

Ecology, though, is not the novel's only attraction. Williams and the others are recognizably human, and their struggle to live is a dramatic story. The book is also, besides an ecological novel, a science-fiction disaster story (it won the International Fantasy Award), with the sure-fire attractions of the genre-wish fulfillment (the Last Man on Earth) and a rewriting of the social contract. (1989, p. 40)

In arguing about the presence of beauty in the genre, firstly, Stewart's novel is, in fact, a pastoral representative kind of fiction. The pandemic has apparently demolished the civil life and technology of the United States of America where all the cities appear empty and devastated. Secondly, the earth seems horrifically empty while the animals are seen in a state of peace and tranquility. Consequently, Ish and his comrades have taken the countryside as their colony to start their post-apocalyptic life after the cities became inhospitable for human living. Further, the pastoral is the place where Ish and his comrades can grow plants and hunt animals: "*Earth Abides* recreates the Adamic hero that embodies the originary thinking inscribed in American pastoral" (Wells, 2007, p. 473). In this context, Stewart employs nature in the post-apocalyptic life to depict the possibility of life return.

In post-apocalyptic novels, writers show the survivors in their wandering through the lifeless and empty world. The survivors also are seen showing patience and tolerance in the face of the harsh life. Meanwhile, the endless struggle of the survivors through the wreckage and ruins indicates the preciousness of the human's life. Basically, in the period where millions of people died after the Second World War, the genre came to appreciate the human's life in a

world that is stripped away from the human principles. In this regard, the post-apocalyptic genre offers the wasteland and ruins to refer to the end of the civil societies that have become lost and homeless in a vast horrific world. However, this study finds beauty and sophistication in the employment of nature. For example, in *Earth Abides*, Stewart shows Ish in the mountains of California where he had no idea of what happened down the mountain. This sublime in the scene offers an impression of eternality and survival. Therefore, the mountains represent power, highness, pride, and harshness as well. This sublimity in the novel reveals the hard coming days in Ish's society's life.

The story follows the life of Isherwood Williams, a naturalist who begins the book on a field trip in the mountains of California. When he returns he finds that a mysterious plague has devastated humanity; he is left to wander the ghost towns and empty roads, watching passively as the unchecked forces of nature begin to return the ECOLOGY to a wild, untamed state. (Mann, 2001, p. 287)

On the other side of the novel, Stewart adds the element of animals to add more beauty to nature and give a complete image of the post-civilized life. Stewart in his portrayal of the post-civilized life utilizes different kinds of animals in the novel such as lions, cows, horses, cattle, bears, coyotes, and several others. The story begins when Ish was bitten by a rattlesnake and measles started to get on his face. Also, Matheson has used several other elements in regard to animal deployment in the novel. In his travel across the deserted city, Ish saw a coyote passing in front of his car:

That was no farm dog. It was a coyote, calmly loping along the highway in broad daylight. Strange how soon it had known that the world had changed, and that it could take new freedoms! (Stewart, p. 19)

In this context, the free movement of animals across the deserted city is an indication of the catastrophic demise of the human after the fast growth of nature in the absence of technology. Furthermore, the novel displays the beauty through the employment of the wilderness that has become a place for the roaming animals. It also shows how the mixing of man and animals has become closer in the grand wilderness. Besides, the city which is encircled by grass and bushes has become home for the roaming animals. The cattle, for instance, have

become free to roam in the utterly empty cities. In this respect, the novel presents a fantastical image of the existence of animals over the disappearance of mankind. Subsequently, the animals have naturally been left to their nature without any interference from humans. In this case, Stewart has beautifully shown the struggle of animals and the human race to survive despite the major influence of the absence of technology on the human. Finally, wilderness and animals in post-apocalyptic fiction is a positive utilization that indicates the power of nature over civilizations in the presence of technology.

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